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# *Histoire(s) de l'art*: The Queer Curation of Vincent Dieutre

Jules O'Dwyer

**Abstract:** Over the last twenty years, Vincent Dieutre has established himself as a unique voice in French experimental cinema. In this article, I examine the curatorial logic of Dieutre's queer cinema through a close reading of *Leçons de ténèbres* (1999)—a multilayered essay film that simultaneously depicts the filmmaker's protracted breakup with his ailing partner, a journey from the Netherlands through to Southern Italy, and an intersensory meditation on Caravaggist aesthetics. While Dieutre's work is commonly characterised by long and languorous travelling shots, I argue that his interest lies not only in mapping vast stretches of space, but in excavating layers of time. In *Leçons de ténèbres*, processes of archival reconfiguration are achieved through modes of curation; the shifting relation between word and image subtly recalibrates the relation between the past and present. Drawing on Brian Glavey's recent account of queer ekphrasis, as well as a broader context of verbal-visual relations in gay culture, I explore the ways in which Dieutre's curatorial methods allows us to rethink relations between sexuality, temporality and aesthetics.

I want to bring a little bit of Caravaggio into [the film's gay] club, and perhaps also vice versa. (Dieutre, *Leçons de ténèbres*)

In 2011, a colloquium entitled “Let's Queer Art History!” was held at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. Organised by the art historian Patricia Falguières during a short curatorial residency, the event sought to redress a missed encounter between the teaching and curation of art history in France on the one hand, and queer theory on the other. In the final paper delivered at this event, art historian Adrian Rifkin invoked the lexicon of Jacques Rancière to articulate his call for art historical approaches that might prompt an alternative, wilfully anachronistic “distribution of the sensible”. Reading against the grain of art history's categorising impulses, which are so often predicated on a tacit, untroubled conception of the universal, his intervention resonated here with what we might broadly define as queer theory's archival turn. Privileging affective engagement over an adherence to chronology, Rifkin spoke of an ethical necessity to elaborate, in the register of the first person, “histories of arts which are interwoven with our own experiences.”

In this article, I want to suggest that an answer to Rifkin's call finds its expression in the cinema of Vincent Dieutre—an experimental gay filmmaker whose work over the last two decades has been marked by a sustained preoccupation with the connections between queer sexuality and artistic/autofictive self-fashioning.<sup>1</sup> By making this sideways move from art criticism into film aesthetics, we can note provisionally the ways in which an appeal to “*histoires*” already anchors us firmly in a rich tradition of French experimental cinema. Jean-Luc Godard's well-known *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1989–1998) constituted an ambitious exercise in metacinematic cruising; this compelling filmic artefact brought to the fore cinema's propensity towards reconfiguration or bricolage. Here, the polyvalence of the French word “*histoire*” (denoting both story and history) cuts between the individual and the collective, while the parenthetical pluralisation of Godard's title opens further still onto multiple (hi)stories. This article offers an account of how the cinematic vision and practice of Vincent Dieutre further expands these gestures. Like Godard's *Histoire(s)*, his second feature film *Leçons de*

*ténèbres* (*Tenebrae Lessons*, 1999) similarly gleans from the archives of visual culture to propose an alternative curatorial praxis. Furthermore, Dieutre's queer cinema resonates with Rifkin's vision by intermeshing autofictive biography and art historical engagement.

Following a brief introduction to Vincent Dieutre's work, I consider the curatorial logic of *Leçons de ténèbres* by paying attention to how its formal, auditory and visual elements are engaged with temporality—constantly negotiating the line between past and present. This film's ekphrastic dynamics, I go on to argue, are implicitly bound up with Dieutre's libidinal investments, while his various attempts to capture fleeting instances of affective contact with the film's art historical frame might best be understood as a cinematic corollary to what Carolyn Dinshaw has termed a "queer" desire "for partial, affective connection, for community, for even a touch across time" (21). Finally, the broader point that I wish to raise in the context of this special issue on queer media temporalities is that Dieutre's work asks us to think the predicate "queer" not only in relation to the temporal, but in relation to the object(s) of media itself. While Dieutre's film criticism and praxis can indeed be placed into productive dialogue with a growing body of critical literature on notions of queer space and time, they also exhibit an intermedial promiscuity which is intricately bound up with his exploration of gay sexuality. I thus want to suggest ways in which Dieutre's work can open new ways of thinking about queer film aesthetics.

### Curating Dieutre's Cinema

Vincent Dieutre (b. 1960) is a French experimental filmmaker whose work has enjoyed critical success on the art film circuit. Although he is based primarily in Paris, his peripatetic mode of filmmaking has taken him across Europe to Italy, Germany and the Netherlands, as well as to Europe's contested Mediterranean frontiers. Despite the ever-broadening geographic and thematic terrain of his filmmaking, his poetic docufiction films are characterised by their frank portrayal of gay relations, queer pathos and intimate mode of address. His early works such as *Rome désolée* (*Desolate Rome*, 1995) explored the vicissitudes of his heroin addiction during the 1980s as well as addressing the enduring effects of the AIDS crisis throughout Europe, while the more recent *Jaurès* (2012) and *Orlando Ferito* (*Roland Wounded*, 2015) touch on geopolitical themes surrounding migration. His aesthetic exhibits a formal debt to French and Francophone auteurs, including the aforementioned Jean-Luc Godard, as well as Chantal Akerman and Marguerite Duras. And while his films frequently deploy long and languorous travelling shots, his interest lies not only in mapping vast stretches of space, but also in excavating layers of time.

Film scholar Martine Beugnet situates Dieutre's filmmaking practice within a wider network of French independent filmmakers whose work has been heralded by the distributor Pointlignepian and discussed under the rubric of a "*tiers-cinéma*" (or "third cinema") (548).<sup>2</sup> Dieutre's cinematic manifesto, "*Abécédaire pour un tiers-cinéma*" (2003), lays out his vision for the minor mode of filmmaking he has pursued over the past two decades. While Dieutre's artistic statements are often opaque, this document offers a useful, if not idiosyncratic, heuristic for thinking about the formal dynamics of his practice. Tapping into a rich vein of cinematic thinking in France which can be traced back as far as Alexandre Astruc and the French New Wave, the guiding metaphor behind his cinematic ambitions is that of writing:

The *tiers-cinéma* likes to consider cinema as a form of writing. This no doubt motivates its wish to revisit minor literatures. Formerly caught in a double-bind between the epic and the novel, cinema can henceforth be written in the form of a diary or a letter. ("*Abécédaire*"; my translation)

Dieutre has indicated in later interviews how this is expressed in practical terms. He typically starts his projects by gathering visual footage and subsequently elaborates a written text which, through the labour of audiovisual montage, is later renegotiated alongside the image. Audiovisual relations in his cinema often bear the marks of this asynchrony, and his work is frequently spaced by gaps and ellipses. Dieutre considers the “typical” deployment of the voiceover, for the purpose of illustration to assure narrative coherence, as “redundant” because “nondialectical” (UniversCiné; my translation). Rather, his interests lie in exploring shifting relations between word and image, as well as the ambiguous timeframes, liminal spaces and ekphrastic possibilities that exist at these interstices. While François Bonenfant is right to align his film texts with a broader body of experimental cinema by Duras and Frédéric Mitterrand, his contention that Dieutre’s cinema is guided by the primordially of the read voice (“la primordialité ... de la voix lue”) captures neither the palimpsestic particularities of his audiovisual montage, nor the dynamic, multilayered temporalities that the spectator must grapple with at the point of reception (74). As Dieutre explains, and as I will subsequently illustrate, “the viewer is asked to partake in the work of reconstruction” (UniversCiné; my translation).

One of Vincent Dieutre’s most rich and compelling films, in respect of the above, is *Leçons de ténèbres* because it not only exhibits the formal dynamics I describe here, but its narrative investment in art history offers a lexicon to articulate how relations between word and image might be negotiated. The first term that I want to insist on here is that of curation. Notoriously difficult to fix from a temporal standpoint, cinematic curation on the one hand implies a relation of *posterity* to a body of on-screen images; it is considered as a supplementary, explicative layer, it brings out the pre-existing contours of an art object. Yet in the context of queer visual studies, thinkers as diverse as Ann Cvetkovich, Jack Halberstam and José Esteban Muñoz have advanced understandings of curation as a set of generative practices which reassemble visual material in order to forge countervailing genealogies and futures. If the negotiation between these twin temporal movements is already at play in Dieutre’s *Leçons de ténèbres*, then the subjective investments of his film force us to contend with one more way of engaging the line between past and present. By exploring the overlap between art historical commentary and dynamic forms of autobiography, his film also hypostasises the idea of *self-curation*.

Released in 1999, *Leçons de ténèbres* is a fragmentary film that combines a range of cinematic media (digital video, Super 8 and 35mm film). Both complementing and complicating this multitextured aesthetic, Dieutre also juxtaposes multiple narrative levels. The film simultaneously presents a narrative about a protracted breakup with his ailing partner Tadeusz who, various periphrastic cues lead us to suspect, is suffering from AIDS-related illness; it documents a journey from the Netherlands (Utrecht) through to Italy (Naples, then Rome); and finally it offers what Marlène Monteiro has called an “unconventional” art documentary on Caravaggist painting (“Self-Portrait”), complete with an in-film interview with queer theorist Leo Bersani.

Over the course of this travelogue, Dieutre effectively charts the reverse trajectory of the Caravaggisti, whose influence moved from Italy through to Northern Europe. Given that the spatiotemporal logic of the film goes against the historical framework in which it is ostensibly invested, we therefore ought to look elsewhere to identify the essay film’s governing logic. Previous accounts of this film emphasise how its divergent narrative strands are brought into relation through close attention to the sensuous, aesthetic dimensions of baroque painting. The tonal ambivalence of chiaroscuro lighting, for example, is called upon to intimate both pleasure and pain, providing Dieutre with the affective register in which to explore the themes of love,

loss and sex that propel the film's narrative strands. Dieutre also makes extended use of the cinematic tableau vivant to stage scenes with his sexual partners, thus confounding distinctions between discrete art forms, narrative layers, past and present. Yet, while Martine Beugnet and Marlène Monteiro ("Self-Portrait"; "Body") have analysed the film through the generic and cinematographic lens of the "cinema of sensation" and both foreground the material plenum of its diegesis (its corollary, at the level of reception, being a "haptic" address), their shared investment in a logic of visual immersion runs the risk of flattening the film's structural complexity. As I have already suggested, Dieutre's cinema is predicated on a dialectical tension that can be traced back to the relation of word and image. Reducible neither to what we see or hear, the filmmaker's use of acousmatic voices and eidetic evocations of past encounters bespeaks altogether queerer configurations of time and space, presence and absence.

This leads me towards the second term that I explore in my reading of the film: ekphrasis. In her analysis, Monteiro suggests, but leaves largely underdeveloped, the idea that the rhetorical figure of ekphrasis (itself, a form of curation) might yield productive readings of the film. While her use of this term diverges from my own,<sup>3</sup> I want to expand this suggestive dynamic in the next section, thinking more capaciously about the intermedial and anachronistically productive contours of *Leçons de ténèbres*. I will argue below that Dieutre's form of ekphrastic commentary complicates relations between past and present in cinematic terms, while the film's distinctive techniques of voiceover curation also provide Dieutre with a means of cathecting and reconfiguring the objects and spaces that the spectator encounters.

### Dieutre's Ekphrastic Impulse

In his cinematic manifesto, Vincent Dieutre dedicates much space to the increasingly porous boundaries between media: "Literature, the plastic arts, even dance", he writes, "autobiography surfaces in many forms ... While the written word has for a long time been considered the privileged medium of autobiographic enquiry, autobiography is now principally at stake in the *tiers-cinéma*" ("Abécédaire"; my translation). In a particularly dense passage, he continues to stake out his vision of the *tiers-cinéma* by reflecting on both its origins and its future

Necessarily literary in its earlier iterations ([Marguerite] Duras, [Frédéric] Mitterrand, [Hervé] Guibert), a first-person cinema [*cinéma du je*], led by the digital video rebellion, is starting to invade the public sphere, and risks becoming a genre ("my father is a transvestite"). (Abécédaire"; my translation)

What might initially strike us as the most perplexing element of this passage is perhaps also the most pertinent. Dieutre's parenthetical comment on the hybrid origins of the *tiers-cinéma* is articulated via the unusual metaphor of queer filiation. Exploiting the polyvalence of the French word "genre" (its slippery signification encompassing both "genre" and "gender") Dieutre's pun subverts a rigid delineation of the arts, based on purity and medium specificity, to move to the creative affordances of intermedia. One can indeed read in Dieutre's statement an analogy between queerness and transversal arts practice which resonates with, but also importantly reconfigures, a well-established trope in ekphrastic discourse: the logic of the *paragon* or antagonism between the "sister arts".

At its most simple level, the much-debated term "ekphrasis" names a device in which a visual object is re-presented verbally. Going beyond the mere practice of description, however, the ekphrastic impulse exerts pressure on the rhetorical capacities of language to evoke an image eidetically. A particular form of "speaking out" (from *ek* (go beyond) and *phrazô*

(explain or show)), the aim of ekphrastic description is to traverse media registers and to reterritorialise the visual image in the realm of imagination via the medium of language. As should become evident in my subsequent analysis, eidetic images also harbour an interesting temporal dimension given that they often serve a mnemonic function. As a mode of figuration, the eidetic image not only calls into question the discrete boundaries of media, but it also seeks to broach or even collapse the temporal and experiential distance between first and second sighting.

Yet how might we better understand the relation between ekphrastic experimentation and Dieutre's abiding interest in queer sexuality? In *The Wallflower Avant-Garde*, Brian Glavey writes that "[t]he relationship between word and images often becomes a means of negotiating some of the most basic features of our interaction with the world and its inhabitants" (4), and such a relationship is therefore actively inflected by the politics of desire, alterity, as well as broad social hierarchies pertaining, for instance, to gender. Complicating the gendered metaphor of the "sister arts", a trope which W. J. T. Mitchell suggests typifies the social biases subtending inter-art relations in the Western aesthetic tradition ("Politics of Genre" 108), Glavey centres his attention on sexuality as a crucial vector of analysis. Exploring the curatorial strategies of queer artists and writers, Glavey contends that "[e]kphrasis is in many ways the queer art par excellence, in part because it explicitly pursues its examination of errors and eros in relation to the question of art itself" and, while queer theory and ekphrastic praxis seems like "unlikely bedfellows", resonances between both registers come to the fore when addressing minor modes of aesthetic appreciation (8, 9). On the one hand, "[t]he story of modern sexuality necessarily revolves around the relation between what can be seen and what can be said" whereas "[e]kphrasis is not simply about seeing; it is also about *showing* and *sharing*" (Glavey 9; added emphasis). A queer ekphrastics, then, alert also to the possibility of *misdescribing* or *recathecting* its object, might therefore be dedicated to exploring an "unpredictable spectrum of relationality, multiplying ways of desiring, identifying with, attaching to, loving, imitating, envying, and sometimes ignoring works of art" (Glavey 6). The principal insights that Glavey raises here, and which can indeed be brought to bear on Dieutre's cinematic practice, are that ekphrasis reveals a suspicion of generic categories, it exhibits a privileged relation to anachrony and asynchrony, and it is susceptible to a homoerotic cathexis. Poised at the intersection between cinema and the plastic arts, and exemplifying the audiovisual tensions that I earlier outlined, *Leçons de ténèbres* prompts us to consider the queer and temporal dimension of ekphrasis, and it is to this concern that I now turn.

### **Between Word and Image: *Leçons de ténèbres***

As is typical of films which attempt to think between painting and the moving image, such as Godard's *Passion* (1975) and Derek Jarman's *Caravaggio* (1986), *Leçons de ténèbres* is committed to questions of temporality, to the interplay between movement and dynamism. The film's vast body of images, gleaned from this southwards trip through Europe, range from fluid, phenomenological detailing through to sober, measured architectural forms; from unsteady close-ups exploring bodies, gestures and the rhythms of daily life through to protracted static shots of streets, landscapes and urban infrastructure. The multiple cinematic formats that Dieutre moves between imbues the cinematography with further degrees of texture and variegation. At the auditory level, the film's footage is set against the ambient noises of the filmmaker's environs: amplified sounds emanating from car radios, church bells, traffic and voices coalesce in a dense sonic collage which gives way, intermittently, to Dieutre's acousmatic voiceover.<sup>4</sup> Thinking with reference to Dieutre's predilection for writing above, the film's textual elements are equally varied, comprising the use of intertexts (for instance, an epigraph by French novelist Louis-René des Fôres grounds the film), the visual capture of

contingent textual fragments which move in and out of the film's frame, as well as what Bonenfant has suggestively called the "writerly" timbre and cadence of the voiceover (74).

Given Dieutre's choice description of the filmmaking process in quasi-collagistic terms—he speaks of collating and reconfiguring material fragments which have been "deliberately torn from the real" ("Abécédaire"), and his further comment that this reorganisation of "images and sounds" serves an aleatory function (creating an open-ended "initiatory journey" ("UniversCiné"))—I want to trace the dialectics of word and image, and presence and absence in *Leçons de ténèbres* to explore how they suggestively contour the film's exploration of gay sexuality, queer space and time. I draw attention here to two instances of ekphrastic narration in the film, the first of which relates to the film's urban vernacular register, its investment in the spaces of the everyday, and the second which starts to engage the film's artistic frame.



Figures 1 and 2: Cruising the cavities of the city. *Leçons de ténèbres*. Optimale, 1999. Screenshots.

The overarching idea of the film, as I have suggested above, is to propose a travelogue that retraces an artistic, affective and cinematographic cartography of Europe.<sup>5</sup> Early in the film, during the first "chapter", which takes place in the Netherlands, we find a passage that echoes Marguerite Duras's experimental short, *Aurélia Steiner (Melbourne)* (1979), at the levels of form and structure. The camera moves along the banks of a canal, recording long stretches. Over these images we hear Dieutre's gravelly voice over an extradiegetic soundscape of reverberating drips. The boat's cruising movement is apposite here because it echoes the narrated subject matter of cruising—a term which names, in the gay vernacular, a practice of socio-sexual itinerancy.<sup>6</sup> The moving images map the stretch of the canal, varying in light exposure. As the image alternates between the dark arches and the dawn-lit quay, Dieutre recounts an anonymous encounter with a sexual partner in a nearby sauna. The twin registers of the visual and verbal, image and narrating voice, enter into an oddly suggestive concordance here; the cavities of bodies and the infrastructure of the canal are explored analogically, offering a peculiar inversion of what Emma Wilson has elsewhere termed "a new geography of the body" in which bodies are "stretched out ... like territories to be mapped" (222). While Dieutre's symbolic conceit is a disorienting exercise in the play of scale and space, both the temporal dynamics of this sequence and its interplay between presence and absence, are equally noteworthy.

By taking cruising as his subject, Dieutre poses the aesthetic problem how cinema might give form to the fleeting, ephemeral nature of public sex. While *cinematic* cruising has been variously theorised in work by Gary Needham and R. Bruce Brasell, the most resonant point

of interlocution here is in the cognate field of photography— namely José Muñoz’s insightful essay in *Cruising Utopia* entitled “Ghost of Public Sex” which discusses questions of spectrality and abstraction in the AIDS-related photography of Tony Just. Just’s untitled project was undertaken in 1994 and took as its subject and locus a public bathroom in New York City which was once a cruising spot which had since fallen into ruins. The resultant black and white photographs sought to frame these now abandoned spaces as repositories that are haunted by prior moments in history, which recall prior assemblages of bodies and suggest different modes of relationality. Producing blurry images at various degrees of abstraction, which bear at times a striking resemblance to the profilmic minutiae on which Dieutre’s close-up camera often lingers, the otherwise contingent details of the everyday are made to speak a queer microhistory.

To describe the ghosted materiality of Just’s work, Muñoz draws on Raymond Williams’s notion of a “structure of feeling”: “a process of relating the continuity of social formations within a work of art” (Muñoz 41). In Williams’s words, a structure of feeling provides a way to excavate “the unmistakable presence of certain elements in art which are not covered by (though in one mode, might be reduced to) other formal systems” (qtd. in Muñoz 41). Muñoz adds that “if the eye is sensitized in a certain way, if it can catch other visual frequencies that render specific distillations of lived experience and ground-level history accessible, it can potentially see the ghostly presence of a certain structure of feeling” (42). Clear parallels can be drawn between the transversal moves between “formal systems” that Williams describes and Dieutre’s ekphrastic tendencies described above. The spectator is “sensitized” to the “distillations of lived experience” in *Leçons de ténèbres*, to use Muñoz’s wording, through the film’s intercalation of visual and textual sign systems.

If Dieutre’s work can be productively aligned with that of Just (and even a broader body of photographers such as Félix Gonzalez-Torres, Hervé Guibert and Robert Mapplethorpe) not only because it is informed by the ongoing legacy of AIDS but because it is undergirded structurally by “gaps, auras, residues, and negations” (Muñoz 42), then we must also account for how the medium specificity of cinema further convolutes the temporality of his work. In contradistinction to Roland Barthes’s famous description of the photographic image as inscribing the temporality of the *ça-a-été* (115), the prior image for Dieutre exists in the register of the eidetic: it is deferred, withheld, relayed via voiceover. By providing a curatorial track to this otherwise narratively empty scene, the film’s geographies come to be informed by the bodies that once occupied them. Rather than visualising sex, Dieutre’s narration is situated in the interstices between image, sound and discourse. Yet, while his curatorial mode might solicit alternative and more open-ended forms of stimulation (the imagin(in)g of sex, the pull of the narrator’s voice, and the lapping of the water all add to the passage’s evocative sensory sway), this ekphrastic lag also underscores his film with a sense of absence and pathos. In short, the figuration of sexual possibility is often met by its negation, and the film’s re-excavation of material spaces and intimation of alternative relational possibilities are inextricably linked to the film’s complicated temporal fabric.

*Leçons de ténèbres*’ play with processes of abstraction and substitution becomes even more pronounced in a later scene which moves between images of city spaces and the image-repertoire of the Caravaggisti to stage further encounters. As the scene opens, the screen space is filled with a graffiti-clad brick wall in a nondescript urban back alley. The voiceover proceeds to describe what we are led to assume to be a sexual encounter between men that took place in the precise locale. Smell and touch are foregrounded in Dieutre’s narration which commences in medias res: “he is there, tense and shivering, and he can feel, near his tired face, the drunken scent of the two men’s breath”. Deploying an enticing, sensory lexicon, he exploits the affective ambiguities bound up in the unvisualised relations he describes as taking place



between men; sex is only hinted at in these deictic recollections. However, as the image of the brick wall cuts abruptly to the Caravaggist painter Dirck van Baburen's *Jesus Crowned with Thorns* (1623), the aforementioned voiceover description is subsequently reunderstood as an ekphrastic account of this painting. The editing thus reinfects the signification of both mental and visual images in light of one another, remediating them in divergent affective and aesthetic contexts. Exploiting the subtextual ambiguities of Dieutre's previous description—itsself oscillating between intimacy and domination, pleasure and pain—editing effects of parataxis and catachresis are used to forge a new set of relations between men (both those depicted in the painting and those recalled aurally) as well as highlighting the homoerotic contours of the iconographic frame of reference.<sup>7</sup>

Through its fragmentary and nonlinear form, *Leçons de ténèbres* asks that we respond to its body of images in light of verbal cues. By simultaneously collapsing temporal distinctions and confounding affective ties, scenes such as these produce a queer dissonance which echoes the dynamics that Elizabeth Freeman discusses in her influential study, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Freeman writes that “the very inaccessibility of other times to touch guarantees a binding that cannot be reduced to the literal, the physical—yet cannot be thought otherwise than with the erotic at the center” (127).

### Entering the Fold

I have sought above to adopt the language of art criticism to identify a set of organising principles that help us to make sense of Dieutre's multifaceted film. I have also situated *Leçons de ténèbres* within a wider body of visual art—contemporary and historic—which similarly reconfigure questions of time, historicity, relationality, presence and absence. Finally, I want to turn towards the end of the film to illustrate how its thematic registers are bound together in more general terms. In her study of contemporary engagements with Caravaggist aesthetics, *Quoting Caravaggio*, Mieke Bal suggests that the period with which the film engages is well-suited to the kind of experimental project that Dieutre undertakes. She discusses baroque aesthetics in terms of its deictic address, its self-reflexivity and, in the very terms that undergird my previous analysis, its “porous delimitation of the domains of vision and discourse” (7). Drawing on a philosophical conception of the fold stemming from Leibniz to Deleuze, she speaks of the baroque's privileged ability to incorporate or “enfold” contemporary material into its frame. “Neo-baroque art”, a category in which we might situate Dieutre's film, pivots on a visual and temporal vacillation which “binds contemporary to baroque art”, thus allowing for “a certain coevalness [to] be alleged” (Bal 7).

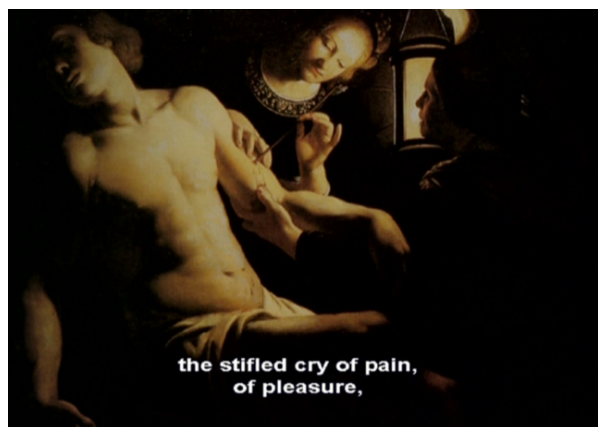
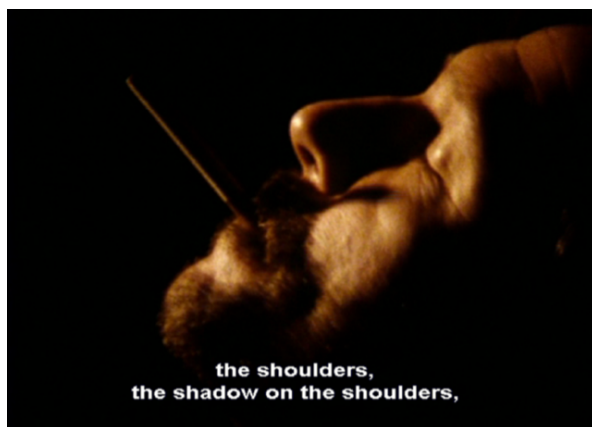


Figures 3 and 4: Aesthetics and erotics of entanglement. *Leçons de ténèbres*. Screenshots.

A similar entanglement of past and present underpin *Leçons de ténèbres*. Consider, for instance, the film's opening sequence in a museum gallery which prefigures the multiple strands of the essay film: Dieutre's hand slowly extends outwards as if to caress the shoulder and torso of a painted figure. Through the use of extreme close-up and a softened lens, the delineation between figure-ground dissolves and his hand gestures towards the peculiarly diaphanous boundaries between media, between autofiction and documentary, and the contemporary and the historic which he continues to probe over the course of the film. If, as Saige Walton has more recently suggested, cinematic iterations of the baroque exhibit "a fundamentally correlative aesthetic that entangles one body with another" (21), then Dieutre's film suggests ways in which such acts of "incorporation" may be erotically charged.

Rather than dramatising Caravaggio's life and oeuvre (cf. Jarman's *Caravaggio*), Dieutre, through innovative processes of self-curation, brings the affective and erotic dimensions of Caravaggism into dialogue with his own ever-shifting situation—whether sexual, emotional, or geographical. "Through the craft of editing and cinematographic arrangement", he states, "I hope for a little bit of Caravaggio to enter into the [film's] nightclub [scene] and vice versa" ("Interview", own translation). We can similarly read the imbrication of the film's historically diverse visual registers—from pornography to art history as well as the various gradations in between—as a further instance of archival cruising; a navigation between "high" and "low" cultural registers, diverse media formats, and the temporal axes of past and present which is, to adopt the neologism central to Bal's study, "pre-posterous".<sup>8</sup>

In his subsequent reflections on the film, Dieutre has spoken in knowingly suggestive terms about *Leçons de ténèbres*' "interpenetrating" registers; in which "the experience of love" and "the aesthetic experience of the tableau" mutually inflect one another. ("Interview"). The opening scene's enmeshing of body and painting illustrates not only Dieutre's point, but it also exemplifies what Glavey has termed the queerness of "near-identification", a form of aesthetic attachment which "resemble[s] an ersatz object relation by which the self strives to construct a world it can bear to live in" (3). The ekphrastic voiceover, in addition to broaching the temporal, experiential gaps that arise in the film, also partakes in this erotics of near-identification. The elision of object choices marks a recurrent motif throughout the film, and I have sought to show how the film uses montage and ekphrastic description to offer a queer perigraphy of sorts, one which sharpens the erotic contours of real, spectral, historical depictions of male relationality, as well as those that remain deferred, unrealised, which linger in the register of the optative.



Figures 5 and 6: Crossing over into the image. *Leçons de ténèbres*. Screenshots.

Towards the end of the film, as the viewer has grown accustomed to the rhythms of Dieutre's voiceover, it becomes evident that he indexes artistic "encounters" (references to "Caravaggio, Honthorst, Caracciolo, Ribera...") in the same way that he enumerates past sexual partners ("André, Alain, Antoine, Antonio..."), the near identical scansion serves here to yoke together the film's personal and art historical web of relations. Finally, once Tadeusz has left the picture and Dieutre finds himself alone in the streets of Rome, and the film's loose narrative and geographic trajectory has reached its denouement, the filmmaker takes this as an opportune moment to fantasise about consummating these links. He speaks of himself in the second person, noting that "Tadeusz is already far away. You are now able to cross over into the image, to finally breach the threshold of the canvas". As we move from images of the filmmaker to a sequence of embedded tableaux, his voiceover is rich in description. His words emphasise the fragmentary detailing of painted bodies, placing particular emphasis on composition, on light and form:

the shoulders, the shadows on shoulders, bodies arrested in their movements, the stifled cry of pain, of pleasure [*jouissance*], the sensual offering of the muscles, the sombre splendour of the faces.

In the final sequence, desired and desiring bodies are placed at the centre of the film's intermedial economy. Yet while the heady combination of *eros* (Dieutre's highly cathected visual pleasure) and *pathos* (his existential malaise) once again reshape the film's body of images, we ought not to lose sight of the filmmaker's erotic and mimetic pull towards these images in the first place. As the film reaches its denouement, its curatorial strategy is thus caught in the very bind that Mitchell has previously identified, in which "the question of desire is inseparable from the problem of the image [and] the two concepts [are] caught in a mutually generative circuit, desire generating images and images generating desire" (*Pictures* 58). That the recursive, Möbian dynamics of Dieutre's desire bears structural similarities to Bal's discussion of the visual pleasure of baroque painting is surely not incidental.

To revisit to the concerns with which we started, *Leçons de ténèbres*, through its intercalation of autobiography, queer microhistories and a broader body of gay aesthetics, adopts a range of curatorial strategies to negotiate the porous boundaries between word and image, self and world, past and present. While this web of relations might indeed be put under strain (and we might question the ethics of Dieutre's often appropriative urge to archive or his self-positioning within the canon of high culture, as critics have previously done<sup>9</sup>) it is also attenuated by the filmmaker's logic of self-divestiture. Dieutre's *histoire*, as a first-person story, is not present throughout, but is broken up, punctuated intermittently as the film gives way to prior histories—of art and iconography, of cities and counter publics, of sexual practices. The productive use of anachrony in *Leçons de ténèbres* thus marks an important step in thinking the relation between queerness and temporal transversality in film, and well as the role of archival reevaluation within queer aesthetics more broadly.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> While Rifkin's intervention provides a helpful way into thinking about the contemporary frame of French queer aesthetics, it is important to stress that he does not share Dieutre's views about exactly who ought to be admitted into this queer fold. As a further point of comparison, however, it is interesting to note that the form of discourse that Rifkin adopts here is that of the apostrophe; like Dieutre, his reflections are frequently addressed *to* the image.

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that Dieutre's critical designation "*tiers-cinéma*" or a "third cinema" becomes a misnomer when translated out of the original French, given that in Anglo-American and Hispanic contexts the term names a more geopolitically expansive form of alternative filmmaking.

<sup>3</sup> Monteiro suggests that "Ágnes Pethő's application of ekphrasis to film" offers a promising framework for thinking intermedial relations in Dieutre's work ("Body", 149–50), however her use of the term, as a guiding trope for the "embedding" of one form of visual media in another, nonetheless privileges the visual over the auditory, thus suggesting that this term is coextensive with "remediation" or "transmediality". While I am indebted to her previous reading of the film, I aim here to reframe Dieutre's ekphrastic impulse in a broader conceptual, literary and queer theoretical framework.

<sup>4</sup> The term acousmatic comes from Michel Chion's coinage of the *acousmètre*—from *acous-* (hear) and *être* (being)—which he uses to describe the ambivalent "place" of the voiceover in film, as a "mysterious" presence which is clearly felt but whose source of emission is not visible in the profilmic space (221).

<sup>5</sup> I echo the terms of Giuliana Bruno here.

<sup>6</sup> The French cognate for "cruising" is "drague", which incidentally contains similar fluvial connotations. On the relation between "drague" and "cruising" see Redoutey.

<sup>7</sup> In light of Dieutre's strategic anachrony, the inclusion of graffiti detailing is also far from contingent. Graffiti can be described in similar terms to those I use to describe Dieutre's curatorial method: it figures as a "tag", a trace, an index of a queer past presence in the sites of the city. In connection to my above discussion, Muñoz once again writes (this time of Just's later work) of graffiti that "through the surplus [it] represent[s, it] seem[s] to tell us something is missing" (45).

<sup>8</sup> In a succinct gloss of Bal's notion of the "pre-posterous", Wayne Andersen notes that "even when juxtaposing, rewriting, over-painting, reworking, or recasting, Bal proposes putting what came chronologically first ('pre') as an after-effect behind ('post') its later recycling, thus fashioning a preposterous history—a vision of how to re-vision the Baroque contrary to proper sense" (354).

<sup>9</sup> Nick Rees-Roberts for instance writes that Dieutre's "lofty references to Schubert and Caravaggio" are integral to his "artistic self-fashioning" (129). Though the charge of bad faith or *mauvaise foi* is not explicitly levelled against the filmmaker, what seems to be implied is that Dieutre's citation of a rarefied artistic canon serves to soften the film's less salubrious moments, providing aesthetic respite from its otherwise "downbeat account of queer sexuality" (130).

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